

INTRODUCTION

Head Start and Early Head Start¹ are comprehensive child development programs which serve children from birth to age 5, pregnant women, and their families. They are child-focused programs, and have the overall goal of increasing the social competence of young children in low-income families. By “social competence” is meant the child’s everyday effectiveness in dealing with both his or her present environment and later responsibilities in school and life. Social competence takes into account the interrelatedness of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development.

Head Start services are also family-centered, following the tenets that children develop in the context of their family and culture and that parents are respected as the primary educators and nurturers of their children. Head Start offers family members with opportunities and support for growth and change, believing that people can identify their own strengths, needs, and interests and are capable of finding solutions.

To support the overall goal of improving social competence, Head Start embraces a core set of values, including commitments to:

- Establish a supportive learning environment for children, parents, and staff, in which the processes of enhancing awareness, refining skills, and increasing understanding are valued and promoted;
- Recognize that the members of the Head Start community — children, families, and staff — have roots in many cultures. Head Start families and staff, working together as a team, can effectively promote respectful, sensitive, and proactive approaches to diversity issues;
- Understand that the empowerment of families occurs when program governance is a responsibility shared by families, governing bodies, and staff, and when the ideas and opinions of families are heard and respected;
- Embrace a comprehensive vision of health for children, families, and staff, which assures that basic health needs are met, encourages practices that prevent future illnesses and injuries, and promotes positive, culturally relevant health behaviors that enhance life-long well-being;
- Respect the importance of all aspects of an individual’s development, including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical growth;
- Build a community in which each child and adult is treated as an individual while, at the same time, a sense of belonging to the group is reinforced;
- Foster relationships with the larger community, so that families and staff are respected and served by a network of community agencies in partnership with one another; and
- Develop a continuum of care, education, and services that allow stable, uninterrupted support to families and children during and after their Head Start experience.

The Head Start program has a long tradition of delivering comprehensive and high quality services designed to foster healthy development in low-income children. Head Start grantee and delegate agencies provide a range of individualized services in the areas of education and early childhood development, medical, dental, and mental health, nutrition, and parent involvement. In addition, the entire range of Head Start services is responsive and appropriate to each child and family’s developmental, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage and experience.

¹ Throughout the Guidance, “Head Start” is used to include both the Early Head Start and Head Start programs.

Head Start fosters the role of parents as the primary educators and nurturers, of and advocates for, their children. Therefore, local Head Start programs work in close partnership with parents to assist them in developing and utilizing individual and family strengths in order to successfully meet personal and family objectives. Parents are encouraged to become involved in all aspects of the program, from participation in children's activities to direct involvement in policy and program decisions.

Head Start is committed to cultivating partnerships within the community. Through the establishment of meaningful links with community organizations and programs focused upon early childhood development, family support, health, and education, each Head Start agency ensures that children and families receive an array of individualized services, and that community resources are used in an efficient and effective manner.

Head Start strives for excellence in program management that supports the provision of quality services for children and families. Policy groups, representative of Head Start parents and the larger community, and strong governing bodies play a critical role in overseeing the implementation of Head Start legislation, regulations, and policies. To achieve national excellence, local agencies are required to establish effective systems and procedures for program, financial, and human resources management. Additionally, a strong focus on staff training and development helps to ensure that children and families are served by individuals with the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to provide high quality, comprehensive services.

The *Head Start Program Performance Standards* are designed to ensure that the Head Start goals and objectives are implemented successfully, that the Head Start philosophy continues to thrive, and that all grantee and delegate agencies maintain the highest possible quality in the provision of Head Start services. To assist agencies in their implementation of the standards, the Head Start Program Performance Standards (45 CFR Part 1304) are presented in this document, along with Guidance materials that illustrate some of the ways the standards could be implemented. Because Head Start services for children with disabilities are fully integrated into all areas of program services, the Head Start Program Performance Standards for Children with Disabilities (45 CFR Part 1308) are reissued in this document. To assist the reader in understanding all aspects of this comprehensive services program, this document also includes other applicable Head Start regulations (45 CFR Parts 1301, 1302, 1303, 1305, and 1306), a selected reference list, and an index.

How to Use This Publication

Those sections of the regulations with Guidance materials (Subparts B-D of Part 1304 and Subparts B-G of Part 1308) are presented in a two-column format. The standards represented in the left-hand column constitute Head Start regulations regarding program operations and activities with which all grantee and delegate agencies are required to comply. They were first published in the *Federal Register* on November 5, 1996 (Part 1304) and January 21, 1993 (Part 1308).

Standards: The *Head Start Program Performance Standards* are the mandatory regulations that grantees and delegate agencies must implement in order to operate a Head Start program. The standards define the objectives and features of a quality Head Start program in concrete terms; they articulate a vision of service delivery to young children and families; and they provide a regulatory structure for the monitoring and enforcement of quality standards.

Because of the critical nature and comprehensive scope of the *Head Start Program Performance Standards*, it is important for grantee and delegate agencies to provide staff members and parents with ongoing training on the standards and on ways to implement them locally. Staff and parents may, for example, be provided with an orientation to this publication, as well as training related to each section. In addition to training staff, agencies are to provide appropriate training to members of Policy Committees and Policy Councils, as well as to other parents, members of governing bodies, and community partners.

The right-hand column of the section of the regulations with Guidance for Part 1304 contains four parts: an Introduction, a Rationale, Related Information, and Guidance.

Introduction: Each of the eleven sections of the *Head Start Program Performance Standards* in Part 1304 begins with an introductory statement summarizing the philosophy behind the section and the contents of the standards.

Rationale: The rationale statements explain *why* a Program Performance Standard is important.

Related Information: Related information provides cross-references to other standards and Guidance materials critical to implementing the standard represented in the left-hand column. References to other Head Start regulations and policy requirements outside the Program Performance Standards, as well as information about other Federal laws, also are listed under this heading. *In looking at related information, one needs to look at both the standard and the accompanying guidance.*

The number of cross-references highlights the way in which the *Head Start Program Performance Standards* are restructured to support an integrated approach to service delivery. No section of the Performance Standards and Guidance can be understood or implemented in isolation from the other sections.

Guidance: The Guidance provides examples or illustrations of *how* the standards could be implemented. Just as local Head Start programs are expected to honor the background and experience of all of the children and families served, the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) recognizes the uniqueness of each local program and the community within which it operates. Therefore, local programs are encouraged to develop approaches appropriate to their own communities — approaches that best meet the needs of the children and families served. These approaches may build upon the Guidance or differ from it.

Rather than being mandatory, as the standards are, the guidance represents *illustrations* of ways agencies *may* operationalize the standards. These illustrations are not the only ways to implement the standards, but are meant to stimulate the thinking of staff and parents about how the standards might be operationalized in their own program.

